



Samuel Beckett, 1969, Ink on board , as represented by cartoonist Edmund Valtman.

From Storms of Sound to Missing Words: The Story of Samuel Beckett's Short prose Fiction

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A chronological overview of Samuel Beckett's short prose fiction may seem an unlikely choice as a celebration of the life and work of the author of seminal texts in the history of 20th-century literature like *Waiting for Godot* or *The Unnamable*. But it takes the reading of these lesser-known texts to fully understand what the whole Beckettian project is about. If Beckett referred to his prose fiction as “the important writing” —significantly, prose was the only genre, with poetry, that he practised from the beginning to the very end of his career— his short prose texts in particular can be said to delineate the story of his creative evolution providing, by virtue of their concentrated nature, magnificent introductions to his varying artistic intentions and writing methods.

As might be expected with an author like Beckett, some of these texts are so innovative or experimental that even terminology fails. Certainly it is hard to call them *fiction*, or *stories*, but even the word *prose* is ill-fitting to describe some of Beckett's more concentrated attempts, one of which was about to be included in a poetry collection when Beckett claimed that it was prose not verse. There are texts that Beckett considered novels but are not much longer than texts he would call short pieces. Many, little differing from Beckett's dramatic monologues, remain to this day the directors' and actors' favourites for adaptation to the stage or simply for public reading. To complicate things further, Beckett's penchant for “miniaturization” has its best expression in these pieces, many of which are reductions of longer texts, published or unpublished, with long and short version coexisting in a canon whose limits prove difficult to define —a bilingual canon for the most part.

1929: An aspiring writer with a promising academic career

Most of Beckett's short prose is little read outside academic circles, but this statement holds particularly true of his earliest productions, be they prose, poetry or criticism. Betraying the academic mind behind them —these are the years of Beckett's appointment at the École Normale in Paris and his lectureship in Trinity College Dublin— they are obscure, erudite texts in which some hints to his mature works can be discerned. Thus we find a striking anticipation of one of the main preoccupations of postwar Beckettian narrators in the constant allusions to voice and voicelessness that we read in *Assumption* (1929), Beckett's first published piece of writing — together with his essay on Joyce's *Work in Progress*— and his first published short story. Plot matters little in a text where an array of learned allusions to Robert Browning, George Meredith, Unanimism and aesthetics frames a detached narrator's presentation of a young man's plight to keep silent in spite of the storm of sound within him. “He could have shouted and could not”, as the opening words put it —a formal forebear of the much better-known closing line of *The Unnamable* (1953), “I can't go on I'll go on”.

1932-1934: “It stinks of Joyce”, or does it?

Once the decision to become a writer had been made and the academic career had been left behind, Beckett started working on the prose episodes that would accumulate to form his first — and posthumous— full-length novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1992). The earliest two episodes — *Sedendo et Quiescendo* (1932) and *Text* (1932)— were published independently, which encouraged Beckett to send *Dream* for publication only to be rejected by a number of publishers. In view of this, Beckett cannibalized the novel to complete a collection of short stories which he was slowly bringing together. The short stories *Walking Out* and *The Smeraldina’s Billet-Doux*, as well as some material in *What a Misfortune* and *Druff*, originated in *Dream*, and appeared in the company of six more texts — *Dante and the Lobster*, *Fingal*, *Ding-Dong*, *A Wet Night*, *Love and Lethe*, and *Yellow*— all sharing the same protagonist, Belacqua, and published collectively as *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934). The poor sales of the collection were already evident before it was placed on the Index of Forbidden Books in Ireland in October 1934.

The limits between episodic novel and collection of stories are challenged in *More Pricks*, as is the distinction between short story and fragment in the 1932 texts, particularly in the 200-word generically-titled *Text*. A lover’s monologue recalling Molly Bloom’s, *Text* is knitted with verbal material from John Ford’s plays. Equally allusive and Joycean — “it stinks of Joyce”, Beckett admitted— is *Sedendo et Quiescendo* where Belacqua, the Dantean-named protagonist of *Dream*, is born, and Beckett enters the Florentine’s purgatory never quite to leave it. Even when he sets it in recognizable Dublin spots, as he does in *More Pricks*, where the comically self-conscious narrator takes over to relate the passive Belacqua’s amours and inner life. Bicycles, tramps, cripples, failed suicides, policemen and the interweaving of tragedy and comedy make first appearances that strikingly anticipate Beckett’s better known postwar texts, so different from these in other respects.

Thinly disguised autobiography and a blatant show of erudition are the signal marks of texts which gain an added value today, given the current interest in Beckett’s formative years fostered by the availability of the notebooks and diaries that he kept as a young adult. In them we see Beckett painstakingly noting down bits of knowledge extracted from all kinds of sources, entries that he could then bring into his own works, a peculiar training method of which these stories — as indeed the posthumous *Dream*— are the earliest products.

1934: Psychoanalysis in London

The confluence of Beckett’s note-taking and his personal experiences is also evident in his 1934 short story *A Case in a Thousand*, written four months after he had taken up psychoanalytic sessions with Wilfred Bion and at the same time that he was undertaking the compilation of his “psychology notes”, 54 pages with passages from a 1931 synoptic overview of the schools of psychology. Widely neglected by critics, *A Case in a Thousand* substitutes the blatant erudition of *More Pricks* for a superabundance of medical terms to relate a teasingly Oedipal case where not only the unconscious is relevant but also the very Beckettian notions of silence, stasis and loneliness.

1946: “The siege in the room”

Twelve years and a world war intervene between the publication of *A Case in a Thousand* and Beckett’s writing of short prose again. Art criticism, reviews, poetry, an unfinished play and two

novels were produced in this most difficult period for him, both personally and intellectually. The move to Paris to live permanently had followed years of wandering between Dublin, London and Germany, and would eventually result in a permanent move to French, to “sinning willy-nilly against a foreign language” in search for the “literature of the unword” that he had announced in his German letter to Axel Kaun in July 1937 (Beckett 1983: 173).

His first French compositions were a bunch of poems and an essay on aesthetics written in 1938. But the real breakthrough takes place in the aftermath of the World War and is best symbolized by the horizontal line that he writes across the notebook page in which he was writing a short story in English, only to continue it—and indeed his subsequent writings—in French. By the end of the year, three more stories and a novel had been accomplished; “the siege in the room”, a very productive six-year period, had begun.

It was in the four “long short stories” or *nouvelles*, as Beckett called them, that a distinctively new way of writing was first implemented, and their relevance to Beckett’s subsequent development must not be underestimated. In *La fin* [*The End*], *L’expulsé* [*The Expelled*], *Premier amour* [*First Love*] and *Le calmant* [*The Calmative*]¹ Beckett’s erudition seems to take a step back—it is symbolically appealing that the switch to French occurred at the moment in *La fin* when the protagonist was narrating the death of his tutor—but the retreat is only apparent: allusion is more subtle and more intricately interwoven with the new form and content, but it is there nonetheless. Patterns recur in these closely interrelated stories where a nameless first person narrator-protagonist, expelled from his usual abode, starts a quest for a hiding place while he recollects past memories and comments on his own narration. *Moving on* is synonymous with *narrating* in these explorations of the “skullscapes” in the character’s young adulthood, old age and life beyond the grave which substitute the more naturalistically populated landscapes of Beckett’s previous short fiction. Traditional narrative procedures are disrupted by these speakers-cum-writers in a way that anticipates, that also, Beckett’s postwar trilogy of novels with which he finally begins to be known in the literary world.

Autobiography still looms large in these pieces, and it was probably on that ground that Beckett withheld *Premier amour* from publication until 1970, and then only to please editors keen to bring out unpublished material by the recent Nobel Prize winner. But he relished the new stylistic departure embodied in these novellas: by December 1946 he was writing to a friend that he would probably not write much more in English.

1951: Disembodied voices

The fashion of making discrete works strongly cross-referential and dependent on one another is one that Beckett would never quite abandon in his fiction-writing. The postwar “trilogy” of novels that come in the wake of the novellas is the nearest instance, and so are the thirteen *Textes pour rien* [*Texts for Nothing*] that follow. These are texts without plot or character but with some basic organizing principles with which the author’s new vision is best expressed, that vision being a reformulation and repetition of *The Unnamable*’s attempt at voicing a concrete existence, where

¹ Beckett’s titles from 1946 on are here given in the original language of composition, followed by the bracketed title used by Beckett in his self-translation, when that exists.

the only action distinguishable is the conflict between different parts of *I* as subject and object, speaker and spoken about. Systematically questioning parameters like time and space, these disembodied voices try to tell stories with characters in which to embody themselves so that others can confirm their existence, but to no avail: the only plot is, in the end, the creative process of the texts themselves. The quest motif is out of sight in texts that are the ultimate non-narration, best expressed by the gaps between the thirteen pieces.

1955: Back to English “to pass the time”

Unable to write any fiction after the *Texts for Nothing*, with theatre and translation proving the only outlets for his creative impulses, Beckett succeeds in penning a short prose fragment entitled *From an Abandoned Work*, which is the first text he writes directly in English in a decade, and whose composition finds Beckett a recognised literary figure after *Godot's* success but a depressed man after the death of his brother Frank. John Pilling claimed recently that it was the overlapping between the composition of this text and the English translation of *Molloy*, together with the explicit autobiographical detail, which led Beckett to abandon the new piece of writing². Certainly autobiographical, this story about an old-aged *I* who squats among the rocks with his “two books” and recollects three days of his childhood, brings readers back to a macrocosm with human beings, animals and landscapes, thus interrupting the neat link that critics would like to establish between the nudity of the *Texts for Nothing* and that of the short prose pieces of the 1960s.

The 1960s: Closed spaces and stasis

Written with difficulty in 1959, Beckett's next novel *Comment c'est* [*How It Is*] expands an image that he first published in the form of a short text entitled *L'image*. This short piece presents two lovers having a picnic as seen by a narrator who then focuses on his own mouth and hand dipping into the mud. The text's main interest lies in its fragmentary relationship with one of the landmarks of Beckett's prose —to the extent that the prose following it is collectively known as “post-*How It Is*”.

If there is a trait common to all post-*How It Is* prose, it is the obsessive image of a figure in a closed space, one that makes its first public appearance in *Faux départs*, a self-descriptive title for the collective publication in 1965 of four very short aborted passages (three in French, one in English) where the figures constructed by imagination are placed on the well-defined limits of a container, its dimensions precisely stated.

Written in English at the same time but withheld from publication until 1976, *All Strange Away* responds to *Faux départ #4* and, in turn, anticipates *Imagination morte imaginez* [*Imagination Dead Imagine*] —the latter described by Beckett as the “residual precipitate” of the former English text, and bearing for title what is the opening phrase, in English, of its two forebears (*All Strange Away* and *Faux départ #4*). These “exercises in human origami” (Beckett 1995: xxviii), with their third person pronoun and clinically detached narrator, present one or two immobile figures cramped in a precisely measured cube or sealed rotunda where the dying but

² “...all the variants of the one”: On *From an Abandoned Work*”, paper read by John Pilling at the *Beckett at Reading 2006* Conference (30 March-2 April 2006).

persistent imagination is seen at work just as memory diminishes, and where gazes don't meet, light goes on and off, hot alternates with cold.

The quest motif makes an unexpected return in *Assez* [*Enough*] almost for the last time in Beckett's fiction—and with a vengeance, for the first-person wandering narrator claims to “have covered several times the equivalent of the terrestrial equator”. Probably written in 1965, the text also returns to a more conventional syntax. For all the imperiousness of the opening phrase, “All that goes before forget”, it is with echoes of past texts that *Enough* is loaded.

Begun also in the mid-1960s, *Le dépeupleur* [*The Lost Ones*], Beckett's longest closed space prose experiment, is unique in that it involves a whole population; no wonder he found the difficulties in this text intractable and was unable to complete it until five years later. In the interim, he works a segment into an independent text entitled *Bing* [*Ping*] and described by Beckett as a “miniaturization of *Le dépeupleur*”, “brief and outrageous all whiteness and silence and finishedness. Hardly publishable which matters not at all” (Cohn: 298). But published it was, after going through ten drafts that provide us with a unique insight into the process of composition of this telegraph-like paragraph with seventy sentences where about a hundred words are combined, there are no verbs, articles, prepositions, conjunctions or pronouns, where periods are the only punctuation, and an omniscient narrator with a searching eye finds himself searched in the end.

The patterned repetition and permutation of words and sentences reaches a peak in *Sans* [*Lessness*], directly linked to *Ping* by Beckett, and written shortly before he was awarded the Nobel Prize in October 1969. Uncharacteristically, Beckett provided a description of the mechanical method he used in the composition of *Lessness*: the first sixty sentences of the text are repeated a second time in a different order, after they have been formed into six thematic groups—collapse of refuge, outer world, body exposed, refuge forgotten, past and future denied, past and future affirmed—and after lists with their random combinations have been drawn out, “first in one disorder, then in another”, to present a body cursing God in a ruined refuge, surrounded by the endlessness of earth and sky. Marking pauses with knocks on the table, Beckett slowly reads these difficult to interpret chains of words in the only official recording of his voice that exists, one which was played in public for the first time during the celebrations of Beckett's centenary in Reading this year.

The 1970s: Requests after the Nobel Prize

In 1970, pressed by his editors for new texts to publish, Beckett manages to add the last paragraph to *Le dépeupleur* [*The Lost Ones*], a long short story whose French title is, like the English “lessness”, a neologism coined by the author. *The Lost Ones* is as much an offshoot of *Imagination Dead Imagine* as *Ping* is an offshoot of *The Lost Ones* and *Lessness* of *Ping*. Such is Beckett's only way of writing short prose from the 1960s onwards. Clinically detached as its forebear, *The Lost Ones* is devoted to the observation and description of a whole community of two-hundred-odd “little people” enclosed in a cylinder, the new variety of “closed space”, where each searches for its lost one, or an exit, but some have given up all hope of ever finding it; rules and codes orchestrate their conduct; hierarchies are established (those perpetually in motion, those who sometimes pause, the sedentary and the vanquished) only to disappear in the final section, where all are vanquished, in complete stasis. Allegorical and dystopian, a Dantean *Inferno* of sorts written in a cold, declarative syntax relishing logic and numbers, *The Lost Ones* closes

with a figure's eyes devouring another's "calm wastes" of eyes —one of the hallmarks of this period's texts, when Beckett himself had to undergo two cataract operations.

With theatre offering relief in a new creative impasse, it would be six years before Beckett completed a new short prose text. Begun two decades earlier, the *Foirades* [*Fizzles*] are eight short, abandoned pieces, seven of which were originally written in French —*Il est tête nue...* [*He is Barehead*], *J'ai renoncé avant de naître* [*I Gave Up before Birth*], *Horn venait la nuit* [*Horn Came Always*], *Vieille terre* [*Old Earth*], *Se voir* [*Closed Place*], *Au loin un oiseau* [*Afar a Bird*], *Pour finir encore* [*For to End Yet Again*]— and one in English, *Still* [*Immobile*]. There are elements from both early and recent Beckett fiction in this sequence of eight pieces where Beckett is concerned with life and death, beginning and ending, sound and silence, movement and stillness: the first six "fizzles" show bodies attempting to move; Murphy and the expelled return; wandering is equivalent to narrating and white is the colour of imagination; the *he/I* conflict is present but so is the total absence of pronouns; a man in a room is depicted, but so is a multitude.

Before Beckett was able to complete the last of the eight "fizzles" (*For to End Yet Again*) in 1975, he had time to write four more short pieces, two of them written as companions of *Still* in a short trilogy of texts —the *Still* trilogy (*Still*, *Sounds* and *Still 3*)— that has been published only as an appendix to Beckett's *Complete Short Prose* (1995). Three tableaux of a man, who head in hand, sits in a wicker chair by a window and listens, fold over each other like a three-part Byzantine icon, to explore through sound and vision the preliminaries to complete stasis. *Still* has been described as Beckett's best prose text since *How It Is* by Knowlson and Pilling (177-79).

On completion of *Still 3*, Beckett was asked to contribute to a memorial volume in honour of a dead German poet and he wrote, again in English, *As the Story was Told*. In this text, mostly ignored by critics, we are led to yet another closed place (a summer-house, a tent, a hut) with yet another wicker chair by a window, and a speaker trying to understand his predicament in the answers provided by an external agent. As the story is told him, by tearing a sheet of paper (a verdict?) he brings to an end the life of a man who is being tortured nearby. Echoes of *Text for Nothing 5* reverberate through this short prose text which also anticipates Beckett's last play *What Where*, a text where, once again in Beckett, to be is to be guilty.

Similarly written on commission in 1975, the very short text *La falaise*, a prose poem according to Ackerley and Gontarski (191) is a homage to his friend the painter Bram van Velde where he tries to verbalize one of the images in his paintings: an eye at a window overlooking a barren cliff which dissolves into the sockets in a skull, turns in the end to the whiteness of imagination.

One year later, busy with theatre rehearsals in London and Berlin, he received a new request for a short prose piece. The American composer Morton Feldman asked for a text that he could set to music, and Beckett wrote *neither*. The publication history of this text is full of oversights, but the most telling incident is Beckett's preventing its being included in the *Collected Poems* that John Calder was preparing in 1977. Generic definitions are broken down with *neither*'s ten one-line paragraphs more than with any other of Beckett's short prose pieces, form being keen to imitate the *betwen-ness* that the text tells about: to and fro, from inner to outershadown, from self to unself, back and forth, from poetry to prose.

Un soir [*One evening*] was written in 1979 on the way to *Mal vu mal dit* [*Ill Seen Ill Said*]. What could have been the opening paragraph of that novel, depicts a new tableau of Beckett's where a dead body lying on the ground recalls Beckett's wandering vagrants with their green overcoats and their hats, the self-conscious narrator's comments emphasizing the return to 1946.

1983-1987: "Oh all to end"

But this evocation of previous texts will turn into a summation of all his oeuvre in the last prose piece that Beckett wrote. *Stirrings Still* [*Soubresauts*], Beckett's last folding icon or trilogy of sorts, is a compendium of his previous creatures, tableaux, images, phrases—even languages, for the English and French versions were written simultaneously from 1983 to 1987. Stillness and stirrings, reality and imagination, inner and outer world: these are the elements that conform this narrative where the three parts are more a repetition of each other than a continuation. A man at a table, head on hands, imagines himself rising and going, waiting for the end of time and grief; he leaves his right mind and does not return there, no end in sight; endeavours to find the word that brings an end to time, grief and the so-called self, and suggests and rejects the words *sad* and *bad*. The quest goes on in the very last text that Beckett wrote in his life: the poem *comment dire* [*what is the word*], a text constructed around the missing word but teasingly suggesting that *what* is the word.

It is a fascinating trip that leads a Beckett reader from *Assumption* to *Stirrings Still*, from the man who dies when he releases the storm of sound within him, to him who searches for the word that brings "time and grief and self so-called. Oh all to end". It is our lot to take advantage of it.

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For me, the theatre is not a moral institution in Schiller's sense. I want neither to instruct nor to improve nor to keep people from getting bored. I want to bring poetry into drama, a poetry which has been through the void and makes a new start in a new room-space. I think in new dimensions and basically am not very worried about whether I can be followed. I couldn't give the answers which were hoped for. There are no easy solutions.

Samuel Beckett's comments on theatre (1961)